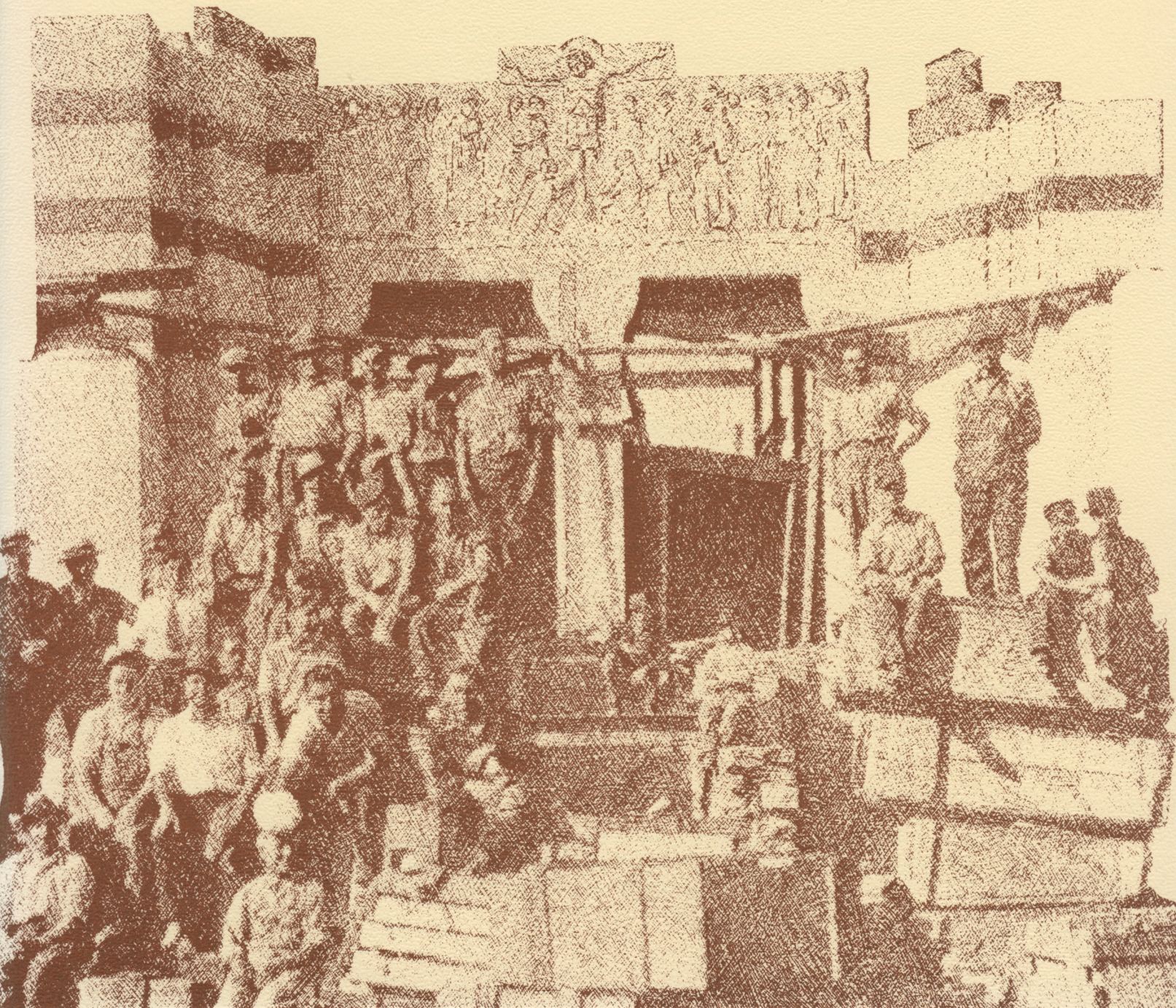


# *The Italians* *in Pennsylvania*

**The Peoples  
of Pennsylvania**

Pamphlet No. 4





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# The Italians in Pennsylvania

## Foreword

**T**he United States is composed of people from many cultural and national backgrounds. Americans can trace their ancestry to Europeans, Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, Australians and American Indians. Today, our population consists of people from over one hundred ethnic groups.

Since its founding in 1681, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has been among the states with the greatest diversity of population. While Pennsylvanians share a common regional and political identity, they also form a mixture of national and ethnic cultures and religious traditions. No history of the Commonwealth would be adequate without coverage of the rich diversity of Pennsylvania's populace.

Thus, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission is publishing these booklets which depict ethnic groups as a means of introducing to the public the history of the many peoples who have made Pennsylvania's history and who have built this great Commonwealth. In this way the Commission continues its efforts to preserve, interpret and disseminate the history of all Pennsylvanians.

**Cover:** Italian stoneworkers during construction of St. Patrick's Church, Wilkes-Barre, circa 1930. In the foreground is crated marble cut in Italy. Photograph from the Vincent Russoniello Collection, the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, Philadelphia.

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# The Italians in Pennsylvania

In the autumn of 1878, author Maude Howe traveled to the village of Roccaraso in the central Italian province of Abruzzi. In her reminiscences, which were published in 1904, she observed that able-bodied men were almost entirely absent from the village. She wrote: "The women do practically all of the work of the community; they dig, plough, sow, and reap." According to the Mayor of Roccaraso, the absence of men was due to the migration of four hundred stonemasons to "Pittsbourgo."

Just how many Italian villages like Roccaraso sent their able-bodied men to work in Pennsylvania cannot be determined. What is known, however, is that between 1880 and the first World War, many of the inhabitants of such provinces as Abruzzi, Campania and Calabria did come to Pennsylvania to work. Italian immigration to Pennsylvania largely reflected the patterns of Italian immigration to the United States as a whole.

Though there were Italians who came to Pennsylvania while it was still a colony, Italian immigration was negligible until the late nineteenth century. In contrast, between 1880 and the outbreak of World War I, thousands came, primarily from Sicily and the southern parts of the peninsula. American laws establishing immigration quotas, enacted after the first World War, sharply curtailed this flow. In the 1930s, some Italians who were opposed to Premier Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime came to the United States, a number settling in Pennsylvania; and these were followed, after World War II, by a small number of Italians displaced by the war. While the number of Italian immigrants to Pennsylvania today has become a trickle, the Pennsylvanians who are descendants of those who made the earlier immigration have become one of the Commonwealth's most influential ethnic groups.

The Italian immigrants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries scattered all over the State, the vast majority settling in Philadelphia or Pittsburgh, where earlier immigrants had established beachheads. Moving into areas whose population did not share their language, religion and cultural traditions, they had to adapt on many levels; but just as Pennsylvania reshaped certain aspects of their lives, they in turn shaped the history of the Commonwealth.

## Early Italian Immigration

Although Italian immigration to the New World dates to the voyages of Christopher Columbus, for nearly three centuries after his explorations only a few lived in the region that later became the United

States. A group of northern Italian Waldensians reportedly arrived in New Castle, Delaware in 1665. One historian has said that some of this group may have sought religious freedom in Philadelphia, but the evidence is inconclusive. It is known, however, that a handful of Italians lived in Pennsylvania when it was a British colony.

During the eighteenth century, when Philadelphia was the cultural center of America, a number of distinguished Italians, mostly from the northern provinces, visited the city. Two of these were musicians, Francis Alberti and Giovanni Gualdo. Filippo Mazzei, a leading scientific and literary figure and member of the Turin Academy of Sciences, visited Philadelphia in 1779. Mazzei presented the American Philosophical Society with a gift of highly prized books. It has been reported that he was a friend of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. Mazzei's writings appeared in contemporary newspapers and pamphlets, promoting the cause of American independence from Great Britain and advocating such doctrines as the equality of all men, an idea incorporated eventually into the Declaration of Independence.

Two distinguished Italians who contributed to the growth of the United States during the Early National period were Paolo Busti of Milan and Francis Vigo of Mondovi. Busti was an agent for the Holland Land Company and oversaw the sale and development of over five million acres in Pennsylvania and New York. Vigo, a fur trader and scout, aided the United States government in efforts to remove the British from the Northwest Territory after the American Revolution. In 1789, Vigo met President George Washington at Carlisle to discuss the military situation relating to the Whiskey Rebellion in the western regions.

From the time of the Revolutionary War until about 1880, Italian migration to Pennsylvania, reflecting changing economic, political and social conditions, was sporadic, with Philadelphia the destination of most. During the antebellum period, most Italians who came to Pennsylvania were from the northern provinces and were well educated and prominent in their trades and professions. For example, in 1838 Filippo Traetta, a musician and composer, came to Philadelphia and established a music conservatory.

Although many of the Italians who took up residence in Philadelphia were musicians and artists whose stay was temporary, some came to the city permanently to further their economic status or to enjoy greater political freedom. These immigrants came to Philadelphia with their families. An indication of their intention to stay in the city is the



support they gave to Pennsylvania's first Italian national congregation, St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi, established in 1853 and located on Montrose Street.

## The Unification of Italy

The decades before and after the American Civil War were times of political turmoil in Italy as well as in the United States. Sympathy for Italians seeking unification of the separate nation-states of the peninsula was widespread in the United States, and admiration grew for its leaders. Of these, none caught the American imagination more than Giuseppe Garibaldi. When America's own Civil War erupted, a number of the newly formed military organizations, inspired by the achievements of the Italian leader, adopted his name. Among these was the "Garibaldi Guard," the sobriquet of Company B, 9th Infantry Regiment of the Pennsylvania Reserve Corps. This unit saw action in some of the heaviest combat of the war, fighting at the Battles of Mechanicsville, Gaines' Mill, Second Bull Run, South Mountain, Antietam, Fredericksburg and Gettysburg.

The national unification of Italy occurred through the Risorgimento Movement of 1859-1870. Because unification occurred relatively late, the typical Italian immigrant identified most strongly with his own village, province or region, rather than with the Italian nation as a whole. Despite this fact, many native-born Pennsylvanians tended to stereotype the immigrants, ignoring the great distinctions that markedly influenced the attitudes of the Italians themselves. The distinction was particularly strong between inhabitants of the northern and the southern provinces.

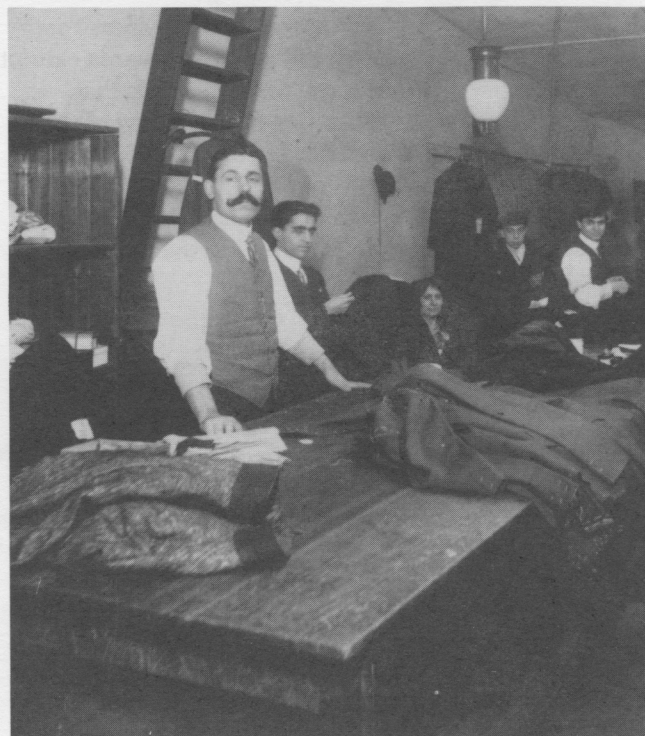
The Italians who lived in the southern peninsula rightfully perceived the national government as acting primarily in the interests of the more industrialized north. The Risorgimento and the formation of a national government did not end the vast disparities in the distribution of wealth and income. Thus, factors in Italy promoting migration coincided with conditions in the United States that encouraged it, setting the stage for the second and most important phase of Italian immigration between 1880 and the outbreak of World War I.

## Push-Pull Factors in Migration

In general, Italians from both the northern and southern provinces migrated because there were few opportunities for economic and social advancement. The factors that prompted them are called "push factors." One of the most important push factors was the difficulty many Italians had in providing for their families on the small plots of land they owned or rented. In many agricultural villages, population

pressure contributed to erosion and exhaustion of the soil. Nor were push factors agriculturally related only. Other influences were low wages, high taxes, underemployment, disease (the cholera epidemic of 1887) and a rigid class system.

Before the Civil War in the United States, the economic opportunities available in Brazil and Argentina had prompted a significant portion of the Italians who left for the New World to migrate to South America. By the 1870's, however, employment opportunities in the United States overshadowed those elsewhere.



*The D'Alonzo Clothing Factory, Philadelphia, 1911-1912. From the Ricci Family Collection, the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, Philadelphia.*

Between 1870 and 1914, jobs were plentiful in growing American cities, such as Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Some Italian workers who migrated to Pennsylvania worked at a number of different jobs — a luxury practically unheard of in Italy — before settling into one. Other workmen were encouraged to come by the hope that they could find a market for such skills as barbering, tailoring, stonecutting, goldsmithing and shoemaking, which they had learned in Italy.

## New Italian Immigration

The dramatic growth of Italian migration is demonstrated by the fact that while the United States Census shows that in 1870 there were only 784 Italian-born residing in Pennsylvania, ten years later



there were 2,794, and in 1890, 24,662. After 1890, the number of native Italians living in Pennsylvania increased further: in 1900, the Census Bureau reported 66,655 Italian-born in the State. The greatest increase occurred between 1900 and 1910, to 196,122 native-born Italians living in Pennsylvania. The first World War imposed some decline in the rate; but even so, by 1920 an additional 26,642 Italian-born immigrants had settled in the State.

When the new wave of Italian immigration to Pennsylvania began in the late 1870's, most of the newcomers were young single men from the villages of southern Italy. Although many were agricultural laborers, most had some knowledge of the wage system of labor. Previous to their arrival in Pennsylvania, many had migrated from their native villages to work as seasonal laborers. Some of these immigrants, who were occasionally referred to as "birds of passage," were assisted by *padrones*, or labor agents, in finding employment and living accommodations. While working in Pennsylvania, they kept in contact with their families and friends in Italy. By providing prospective immigrants with some idea of what to expect when they got to Pennsylvania, they formed the important early links in what later became known as chain migration.



A portrait of the Joseph Fidanza family, Philadelphia. Photograph from the Joseph Fidanza Collection, the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, Philadelphia.

The Italian laborers who came to Pennsylvania in the 1870's usually arrived in New York City and traveled to Philadelphia or Pittsburgh by rail. Many were hired to lay track by the Pennsylvania and the Reading railroads. Other Italian workers found employment in coal mines and the slate quarries. Although the rate of re-entry is not known, a significant percentage of these workers traveled back and forth between Pennsylvania and their native Italian villages numerous times. As a result, immigration figures are not exact. What is known is that some remained in Pennsylvania permanently, setting the stage for the second phase of new Italian immigration to Pennsylvania.

At the turn of the century, Italian immigration to Pennsylvania was still primarily from the provinces of southern Italy. By this time, however, the immigrants were coming in greater proportion with their families, evidence that they had little intention of returning to Italy. With steamship passenger service to Philadelphia beginning in 1908, a number of Italian families traveled directly to Pennsylvania.

Even in the late nineteenth century, the favored destination of most Pennsylvania-bound Italians had been Philadelphia, though the availability of jobs made Pittsburgh a close second. In Philadelphia, Italian laborers found work as makers of wearing apparel, women's shoes and Stetson hats, and later as carpenters in the cabinet shop of Victor/RCA. Thousands of others worked on municipal public-works projects. These jobs enabled some Italian laborers to jump to more skilled trades, becoming masons, bricklayers, plumbers and electricians. Employment such as this provided the immigrant families with a degree of economic security that was unknown in their native village. Moreover, contacts they made on the job enabled them to assist other family members or former villagers in finding employment. Such work also enabled Philadelphia's Italians to save their earnings and purchase homes in South and West Philadelphia, Maybank, Frankfort, Nicetown, and other sections.

The Italian immigrants of Philadelphia formed hundreds of clubs, organizations and associations, both to help their countrymen adjust to life in the United States and to preserve their language and cultural heritage. In May 1904 a number of prominent Italian Philadelphians organized the Italian Federation of Societies to coordinate the Italian community's mutual aid efforts. In 1930, the Federation had thirty-one member societies. Another social organization that was important was the Order of Brotherly Love, founded in 1925. The Order established camps in various sections of the city and aided impoverished children and widows.

Although more Italian immigrants, numerically, settled in Philadelphia than in Pittsburgh, they



composed roughly the same percent of population. In Pittsburgh, Italian laborers frequently worked for the city's public-works services and the Equitable Gas Company, and in the yards of the Pennsylvania Railroad. After 1890, Italians began to predominate in several of Pittsburgh's neighborhoods, such as Oakland, East Liberty, the Lower Hill, the Bluff and Bloomfield. A number of these neighborhoods, such as Bloomfield, had formerly been home to German and Irish families.

While Philadelphia and Pittsburgh attracted most of the Italians who came to Pennsylvania, the Commonwealth's smaller cities, such as Reading, Scranton, Easton and Bethlehem, also acquired Italian enclaves. Scranton was the first city in which the young Amedeo Obici found work. Obici worked at his uncle's fruit stand before venturing on his own. Like his uncle, Obici began by selling fruits and nuts, but found that sales of hot peanuts exceeded all else. Eventually, Obici's business grew into the internationally known Planters Peanut Company.

In the 1880's, Italian stoneworkers began to immigrate to the Easton area, where slate quarries were located. Many of these workers were from Roseto Valforte in the province of Apulia. As a result, they gave the name Roseto to the settlement they founded some fifteen miles from Easton. One slate miner who came to Roseto was Antonio Trigiani. Trigiani worked in the slate mines there for a number of years before he opened his own grocery store. Later, he was elected the Mayor of Roseto and was active in banking.

## Strength in Unity

Wherever in Pennsylvania they settled, the Italians faced many hardships. Thousands worked in jobs that were low paying and hazardous, prompting them to support the labor union movement. Neither steel nor bituminous coal employed large numbers of Italian immigrants. However, Italian workers took part in the day-to-day struggles to organize those trades and industries in which they predominated, such as stonecutting, garment making and barbering. In all three of these trades, the same pattern of organization was followed. First, groups of Italian workers formed a mutual aid society. These Italian community organizations, such as Philadelphia's Italian Tailors' Society, which formed in 1884, and Stella d'Italia, an association of barbers which was formed in 1886, provided insurance and death benefits for their members. These mutual aid societies paved the way for later unions that received support both within and without the Italian community. In the pre-World War I period, Pennsylvania Italians were active in unions, among them the Granite Cutters' International Association, the Stonemasons' International Union of

America, the Journeymen Tailors' International Union of America, and the Journeymen Barbers' International Union of America.



*The Stetson Hat Company of Philadelphia employed many Italian workers in the manufacture of hats. Photograph from Philadelphia Commercial Museum Collection, Pennsylvania State Archives.*

Many Italian immigrants could not find or afford decent housing. Some had to take their children out of school to secure jobs to contribute to the family income. In certain cases, married women were also compelled by necessity to combine their role as homemaker with that of wage earner. Economic hardships were compounded by social difficulties; because of differences in language, religion and values, Italian immigrants were often feared and ostracized.

Despite instances of discrimination and exploitation, the Italians did not surrender their values and culture. Instead, they developed religious, political, economic and social institutions to support them in adjusting to life in Pennsylvania and to preserve their heritage. Among these, such organizations as Pittsburgh's Ateleta Club and the Castel de Sangro have vanished as Italians have assimilated to the mainstream of society. Others, however, have persisted, especially church-affiliated and fraternal organizations. The Catholic Italians who came to Pennsylvania during the great wave of new



American immigration struggled to establish their own parishes and schools. They wanted Italian, not Irish priests to preside at daily mass, feast-day celebrations, christenings, weddings and funerals. Many of the Italian parishes founded in the state's largest cities flourish today. There are three Italian parishes in Pittsburgh and eleven in Philadelphia. Our Lady of Mt. Carmel serves many of the Catholic Italian families of Allentown, while St. Anthony's is the church of many second- and third-generation Italians who reside in Johnstown.



*Philomena Ricci poses in preparation for her wedding, with her bridesmaid Mary Ricci, probably in Philadelphia. From the Ricci Family Collection, the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, Philadelphia.*

While the majority of Italian immigrants to Pennsylvania were Catholics, Protestant Italians also settled in the Commonwealth. By the first decade of the twentieth century, there were Italian Presbyterian and Baptist churches in Philadelphia. Like Catholic parishes, Protestant churches such as the Italian Methodist Church, founded in 1889 on Catharine Street, formed groups such as the Italian Immigrants Assistance Society to aid newcomers in finding housing, employment and medical aid.

Italian religious institutions have played a key role in helping Italian families preserve their culture. Many of the colorful, Catholic feast-day celebrations

that draw Italian and non-Italian visitors to Pennsylvania's neighborhoods center around the church. In addition, other institutions and organizations have helped to keep language, values and customs alive. Philadelphia is the location of the Order of the Sons of Italy's Grand Pennsylvania Lodge, which publishes the *Sons of Italy Times*. The Italian Folk Art Federation of America is also located in Philadelphia. The cultural heritage of Italians is also important in some of the Commonwealth's smaller communities, as evidenced by the Italian Heritage Society of Loretto.

## Individual Achievements

Like members of other ethnic groups in Pennsylvania, the descendants of Italian immigrants have moved into all levels and activities of society, nationally as well as in the Commonwealth. They have become prominent in the arts, law, sciences, government, commerce, manufacturing and finance. Apart from the many who are prominent today, a number stand out for leading the way from newly arrived immigrant to distinguished citizen. Five who were noteworthy are Charles C. A. Baldi, Walter E. Alessandroni, Frank Vittor, Michael Angelo Musmanno and Mario Lanza.

Charles C. A. Baldi (1862-1930) was born in the province of Salerno and came to Philadelphia in 1876. After working in the mining industry in Pottsville, he and his brothers started a coal business. Later Baldi took up real estate and banking, and was a mortician. He was active in the publication of *L'Opinione*, a widely read Italian-language newspaper, and gave his support to numerous Italian-American clubs and associations. His political influence in Philadelphia was considerable. Until the time of his death, Baldi was involved in efforts to improve public education.

Walter E. Alessandroni (1912-1966) was born in Philadelphia, the son of Italian immigrants. He was a graduate of Villanova University and the University of Pennsylvania's School of Law. Alessandroni enjoyed a distinguished career as an attorney, prompting Governor William W. Scranton to appoint him Attorney General of Pennsylvania. At the time of his premature death, he was considered a prospective candidate for lieutenant governor.

Frank Vittor (1888-1968) was born in Mozzato, Italy, a member of a family of artists. In 1917, Vittor visited Pittsburgh, where he was encouraged to remain by Dr. John A. Brashear, the prominent astronomer, who admired his bronze sculptures. Vittor stayed in Pittsburgh, and taught art and sculpture at the Carnegie Institute, Carnegie Institute of Technology, and numerous social organizations. He was the founder of the Pittsburgh Society of Sculptors. Vittor is often referred to as the "sculptor of





A bronze Christopher Columbus by the Italian-born Pittsburgh sculptor Frank Vittor stands in Schenley Park, erected in 1958 by the Federation of the Sons of Columbus of America. The ornamental detail of the granite base was carved by the artist's brother, Anthony Vittori. Photograph by Vernon Gay.

presidents": he completed busts of Calvin Coolidge, Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt. Vittor's best-known Pittsburgh sculpture is his statue of Christopher Columbus, located in Schenley Park. Vittor died in Pittsburgh in 1968.

Michael Angelo Musmanno (1897-1968) was born in Stowe Township, outside of Pittsburgh. This second-generation Italian was among the attorneys who served as defense counsel in the famous trial of Sacco and Vanzetti in the 1920's. His 1939 book, *After Twelve Years*, discussed this highly publicized case. Following active duty in World War II, he was appointed by President Truman in 1947 to serve as a judge at the International War Crimes Tribunal at Nuremberg. Musmanno was a justice on the Pennsylvania Supreme Court from 1952 to 1968. His autobiography, *The Glory and the Dream*, was published in 1967, one year before his death.

The famous tenor, Mario Lanza (1921-1959), was christened Alfredo Arnold Corozza in south Philadelphia in 1921. His stage surname was his mother's maiden name. Lanza studied voice with Irene Williams, Grant Garnell and Enrico Rosati. During World War II, he sang in the U.S. Army's Special Services, appearing in "On the Beam" and "Winged Victory." After the war, he gave concerts and became a top recording artist. Lanza's fame spread after he signed with the MGM motion picture studio in 1947. Among his films were "That Midnight Kiss," 1949; "The Toast of New Orleans," 1950; "The Great Caruso," 1951; "Because You're Mine," 1952; "Student Prince," 1954; "Serenade," 1956; and "Seven Hills of Rome," 1958. Lanza's October, 1959 death was mourned by the thousands whose lives he had touched through music.

Important though these and many other prominent Italians have been, the influence of thousands of lesser-known Pennsylvanians of Italian ancestry is also evident. The Italian presence, extending over three centuries, but especially important during the past hundred years, has been a major ingredient in the artistic, social, economic, and governmental life of the State. This vibrant and vigorous element among the diversity of cultural and ethnic values has served Pennsylvania well in the past and can be depended on to do so in the future.

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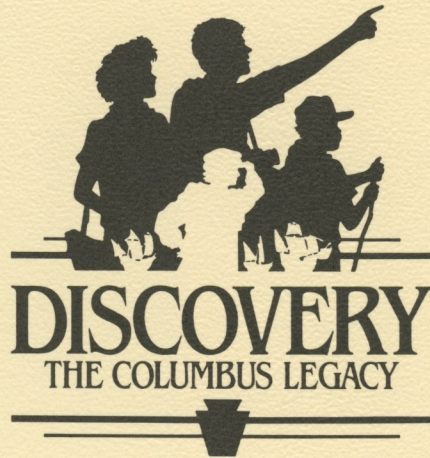
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